



Claudio Abbado conducts Schubert, Beethoven & Wagner

aud 95.627

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[Fanfare](#) (Huntley Dent - 2015.03.26)

This is a commemorative album of Abbado's years at the Lucerne Festival, which spanned five decades. He became a major presence there from 2000 onward after he founded the latest incarnation of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, its core being the Mahler Chamber Orchestra plus hand-picked players from the Berlin Philharmonic and other prestigious European orchestras. Their chief output has been on DVD, with a sprinkling of CD releases. Here, however, we get the Vienna Philharmonic in 1978 (Schubert) and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe in 1988 (Beethoven and Wagner), captured in good broadcast stereo, with the better sound given to the 1988 concert.

That's also where the highlight of the CD occurs, in a dashing account of the Beethoven Second Symphony that surpasses what Abbado usually achieved with Beethoven on disc. I expected a polished, rather noncommittal reading, but this one is fully engaged (actually, the Second Symphony was notably successful in Abbado's two Beethoven cycles for DG). It has pace in every movement and some jauntiness in the Larghetto. Using a chamber orchestra doesn't shrink the sonorities by much, although you'd never think this was Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic—that sort of massiveness became less to Abbado's taste in his maturity. (With Berlin he performed even a middle-period symphony like the "Pastorale" with reduced strings, I believe.)

The Schubert "Unfinished" performance isn't as alive or as convincing. Abbado delivers the kind of high-level subscription concert reading to be heard seven days a week in major music capitals. He seems to have no special affection for the score. To avoid complete impersonality, he makes the soft passages quite soft in contrast with the fortissimo outbursts in the first movement. But the big tune feels anemic as a result, and in the Andante second movement the melting woodwind solos are a touch businesslike. Couldn't the radio archives yield up something more striking?

Conducting Wagner is inescapable if you are the chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, but Abbado avoided his duty on disc, leaving only a single CD completely devoted to orchestral excerpts; everything else was with singers like Jonas Kaufmann and Bryn Terfel. The sole Wagner opera he recorded was Lohengrin in 1995 (it turned out so well one wonders why DG didn't ask for more). This live Siegfried Idyll is a premiere recording in the Abbado discography so far as I can tell. It is gentle, civilized, and nicely balanced, but not very involved. Wagner presented the work as a present to Cosmia when she woke up on Christmas morning in 1870, not just before she went to bed. The villa where a small ensemble of musicians gathered on the stairs to play the piece was in present-day Lucerne, hence the connection. After a relaxed 15 minutes Abbado does stir up some energy at the climax, but that's not quite good enough.

In all, this new release is half a loaf, serving mainly as a memento to a great conductor, not captured at his very best, unfortunately.

